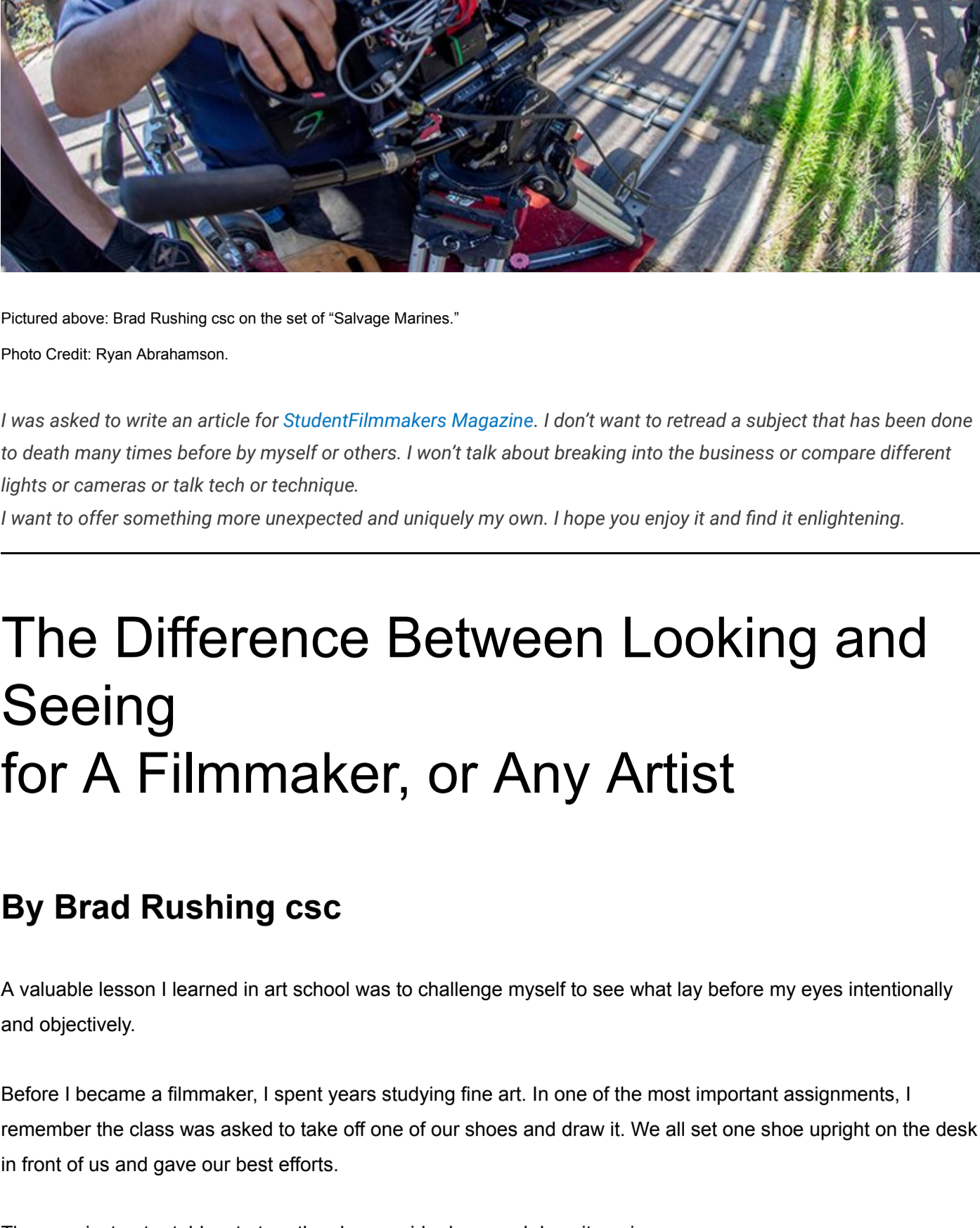


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“The Difference Between Looking and Seeing for A Filmmaker, or Any Artist” By Brad Rushing csc



Picture above: Brad Rushing csc on the set of “Salvage Marines.”
Photo Credit: Ryan Abrahamson.

I was asked to write an article for *StudentFilmmakers Magazine*. I don't want to retread a subject that has been done to death many times before by myself or others. I won't talk about breaking into the business or compare different lights or cameras or talk tech or technique.

I want to offer something more unexpected and uniquely my own. I hope you enjoy it and find it enlightening.

The Difference Between Looking and Seeing for A Filmmaker, or Any Artist

By Brad Rushing csc

A valuable lesson I learned in art school was to challenge myself to see what lay before my eyes intentionally and objectively.

Before I became a filmmaker, I spent years studying fine art. In one of the most important assignments, I remember the class was asked to take off one of our shoes and draw it. We all set one shoe upright on the desk in front of us and gave our best efforts.

Then our instructor told us to turn the shoe upside down and draw it again.

Comparing the results after we were done revealed that for most of us, the upside-down shoe was the most accurately rendered of the two.

Why might that be?

When we see the shoe upright, it is in a very familiar orientation to us. We “know” what that object is. Without being aware of it, our brain tells our hand to draw what we assume a shoe looks like. We go on autopilot drawing our preconceived archetype of what a sole looks like, and laces, etc., with only occasional cursory glances at the true orientation of those things and the actual object. This process causes us to overlook many of the relationships between those elements and the nuances which are the hallmarks of the reality of that object.

Inverting the object, we subvert the familiar orientation, severing our brain's reflexive influence, and we force ourselves to pay close attention to details we had only glanced at before.

Unbeknownst to most of us, our human brains add overlays of assumptions, biases and subjective interpretations to every fragment of information our senses input to them.

This active filtering and manipulation can substantially alter our perception and understanding of the reality which surrounds us.

A confirmation of this interference is evident in the common phenomenon where different people experiencing a similar event will later express conflicting recollections of details: how many people were involved, who acted first, colors of clothing, etc.

That is a small glimpse at the shenanigans our brains play on us constantly.

And so, it is with creative people whose natural mode is filtering the world through artistic expression and sharing the result with an audience.

I have no doubt that those unconscious mental biases can add an element of unique stylistic perspective to our creative voice. But we are not the intentional authors of that addition.

For many people who do not believe they have artistic talent, it is not their fundamental creative and expressive potential that is thwarting their hopes nearly so much as this interference in their ability to perceive.

How well we are able to actually see the world around us is the first link in the creative process; but if our brain involves itself in what we are allowed to perceive that becomes a second, albeit unintentional one.

When we surrender to our brain's reinterpretation of objective reality it deprives us of an important layer of control and choice in the articulation of our work.

Choosing to learn to take control of how we see requires challenging ourselves from moment to moment. If we are not intentional about it, we will always lapse into the default mode with the brain taking control.

I am often asked which favorite cinematographers and/or movies have influenced my style. While I think it is important to study other filmmakers' works, and also still visual artworks and photographs to explore new ideas for techniques, those creations do not belong to me. They do not originate from me, and if I give them too much precedence, I undermine the authenticity of my own voice.

For this reason, my favorite way to discover inspiration for lighting and framing ideas is to actively perceive the world around me as I move through life. These moments and perspectives are uniquely and forever my own, my private glimpses shared with no one else.

In those moments I make myself open, objectively asking the tableau to teach me. I walk into a room, and I see beautiful light pouring through a window highlighting the people inside. *Where is that light coming from? What physical objects are shaping it? What materials are filtering it and creating textures in it?* I will walk to the window to see the angle the source is coming from, the shape of the window, the type of window covering. *Is there a tree with leaves outside at a distance breaking up the light?*

Maybe light is filtering into a room and bouncing off surfaces. *What is the direction of that light? What is the orientation of that bounce to the subject I see being beautifully lit? Is the bounce surface imparting a color to the light? What is the atmosphere in the room like?*

If I am walking on a street at night, I pay attention to the effects of the streetlights, moving car lights, illuminated signs and marquees on stores, reflections, bounces and ambience, etc. I want to understand both the quality imparted by each element, as well as how they interact, moment to moment and in motion through time. It is like I am constantly location scouting wherever I am.

I sometimes feel like the cat staring into space watching phantoms that no one else can see. I remember once in my 20s, I was at a shopping mall staring transfixed into a fountain which was a wondrous shade of cobalt. A friend approached, puzzled and asked what I was doing. I replied, “I am really getting into this blue.” (No. I was not “high”... Smart ass.)

Another important manifestation of this is in choosing camera angles. Remembering that you are always creating the audience's experience of the story, there are times you don't want to get in the way of that, so your coverage choices may be relatively mundane and conventional.

But it is also important to have an awareness of alternatives available to you, even if you do not choose them. For this reason, after intuitively asking myself, *“Where would I put the camera?”* I also ask myself, *“Where wouldn't I put the camera? And why not?”* I want to challenge my assumptions. I want to break the reflexive subjectivity of my brain.

When I am standing in a location, I will sometimes get on a floor and look at the space from a low angle. I will imagine it from high. I will explore the space for openings to look through, move through, or move past. *What about looking in from outside?* Try to exhaust the possibilities and consider all the ones you might normally discount. Experience them, even if they don't feel right in that moment, file them away. Once you get on set and begin shooting, things can change and that perspective may come back to be the best choice, or you may pull it out months later on a completely different project.

I use this same processing when I am looking at other people's cinematography and artwork. It is handy, when given a visual reference, to have a real world understanding of how light behaves in different environments, so when I see reference images I can reverse-engineer how that would be created. *Is the light a point source? A broad source? Direct or bounced? What direction does it come from and how does it behave as actors move through it?*

I like to be surprised with unusual choices. Just the other day I saw a trailer for a film. There was a woman riding in a car sitting in the back seat and looking forlornly out the window. Rather than a more conventional angle, the filmmakers chose to mount the camera with something close to a 35mm lens on a hostess tray outside the passenger window looking straight back. On the left of frame, the road whipped past. The center of frame looked straight back to the vanishing point. And on the right, converging towards the vanishing point, were the bold, mechanical lines of the car, its surface shining, and behind the window overlaid with moving reflections was the girl. The camera was not squared on her. The visual impression was of powerful forward motion, racing away from the vanishing point, and almost as an afterthought, the woman being inexorably carried away to some unknown fate.

It was a distinct and effective choice, and I have filed it away in my visual lexicon as an option to consider for some future project.

I doubt that the filmmakers gave the choice of this placement much analytical thought. I know when I am making a film, I do not. After years of practicing my craft and paying attention to the world around me, I very much work on instinct now. I can feel when framing of a shot or when lighting is right. It's not intellectual. It's a physical sense, like a metal detector. I perceive a building “signal intensity” as a shot is getting close, and I allow myself to be guided by my instincts dialing the qualities in until, “BOOM!” In an instant, all is right with the world. It is a tangible and satisfying moment, virtually impossible for me to describe if someone asks the process leading up to it.

I certainly did not start out here. A good analogy would be learning a musical instrument. In the beginning, you must master the fundamentals. You must have the discipline to learn and practice basic things like scales. You must train your clumsy fingers to be dexterous. In time, and with many hours and months and years of practice, you will get to a point where you no longer think about the technique in the moment of creation, and instead, channel the expressiveness inside your soul.

It is the same with visual arts and cinematography.

You must always practice. Practice seeing intentionally. Be open to what the world you are moving through wants to share with you. The public moments. The private moments. The “loud” moments and the “quiet” moments. Allow yourself to be moved by inspiration and remember those feelings and their catalyst.

In the moments of creation, when you channel your muse directly, you should retain the control to be able to counterpoint your choices. If things are not gelling in the way you hoped, ask yourself: *“What are the options I may have not considered?”*

Train yourself to experience the majestic and delicate visual truths before your eyes with quiet authenticity and integrity. In doing so, you will attain a profound level of control in interpreting how you choose to render those qualities as imagery for an audience.

Sketch by Brad Rushing csc

An example of learning to see with a fresh, unbiased perspective. For this piece, we were allowed to choose our paper and medium. I pulled out this single, odd black sheet of paper and a white Conté crayon and I drew the highlights, instead of the shadows as I normally would. Those simple, unconventional choices made yet another typically boring still life assignment fun and exciting where I explored a completely new relationship with the object and the image. I also think it resulted in one of my very best drawings from college.

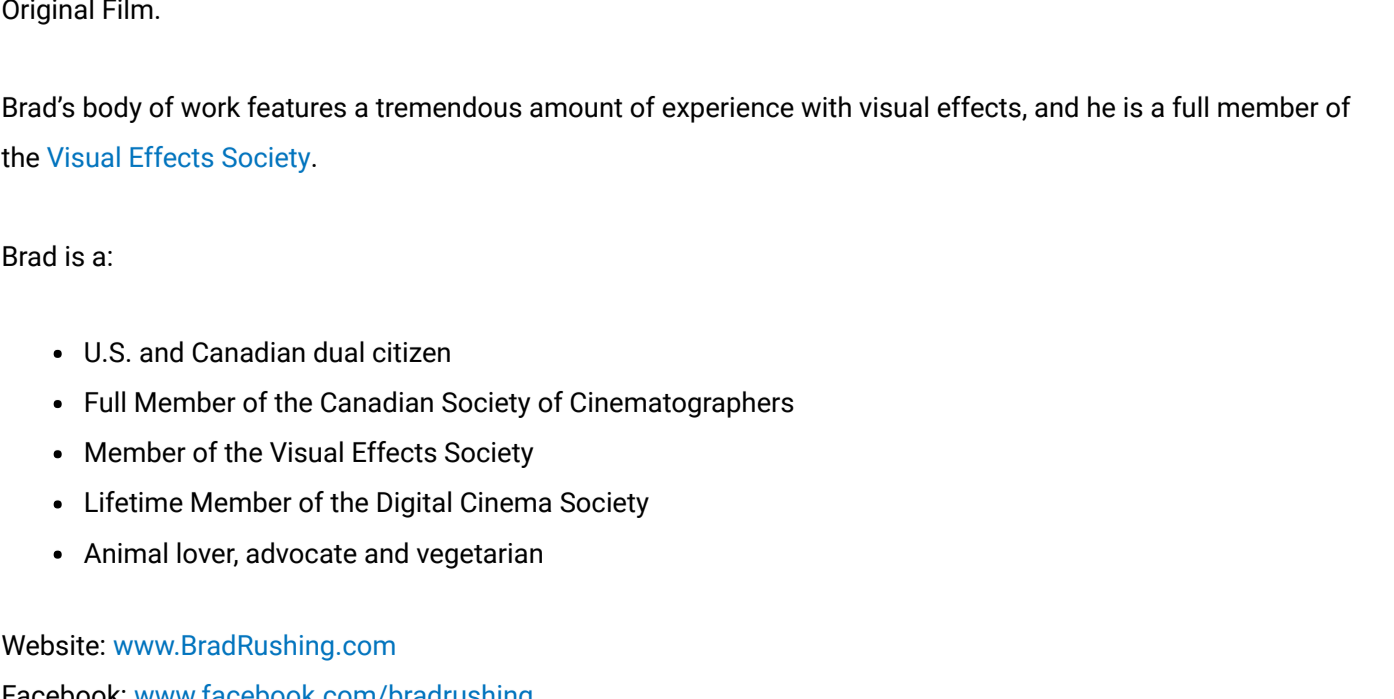
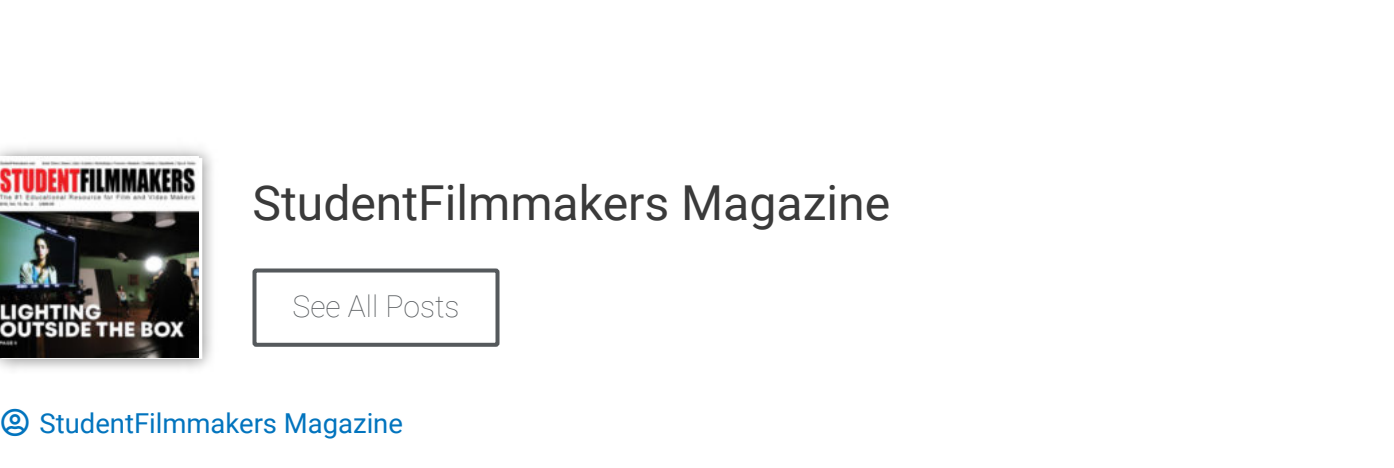


Photo Credit: Brad Rushing.

Brad Rushing csc with director Shaun Piccinino on the set of “Salvage Marines.”



Brad Rushing csc with actor Casper Van Dien on the set of “Salvage Marines.”

Brad Rushing csc with director Shaun Piccinino on the set of “Salvage Marines.”

Photo Credit: Austin Parsons.

Brad Rushing csc on the set of “Salvage Marines.”

Photo Credit: Jeremy Spring.

Brad Rushing csc and Steadicam Operator Timber Hoy on the set of “[in]visible.”

Photo Credit: Piper Ferguson

Brad Rushing csc

BIOGRAPHY

Born and raised in Houston, Texas, Brad expressed an interest in art and science from a very early age. He majored in fine art at Houston's prestigious High School for The Performing and Visual Arts and also college where he added filmmaking for a double major. Upon completing his education, he shifted focus to filmmaking full time.

Roger Cormans's Concorde/New Horizons film studio in Los Angeles afforded Brad some of his first feature film opportunities as Director of Photography where he learned valuable skills for innovation and economy and made lifelong friendships with many people who have become influential filmmakers and collaborators.

After a first concentrating on indie feature films, Brad began to shoot high-end music videos photographing award-winning, iconic clips for artists like Britney Spears, Mariah Carey, Lionel Richie, Nelly and Eminem. Brad's ground-breaking work on Moby's "We Are All Made of Stars" won an MTV Video Music Award "Moon Man" for Best Cinematography in a Video, and many of the other music videos he shot have won awards such as VMAs, MVPAs and Grammys for Best Video. Brad also won a Canadian Society of Cinematographers Award for Best Cinematography in a Video for the Alsou video "Always on My Mind."

Brad has earned a reputation as a gifted commercial cinematographer. His work includes a NASCAR Superbowl spot, notable high-profile national and international campaigns, branded-content and promo work.

Brad was the cinematographer for the Jay Roach-directed, "Dustin Hoffman – Master Class" acting workshop, his second collaboration with director Roach, after previously shooting a promo starring Jack Black.

Brad recently photographed the feature film "Doolittle's Heroes" about the WWII Doolittle Raid retaliatory attack on Japan following Pearl Harbor, which was shot in the U.S. and China, and the upcoming science fiction television series starring Casper Van Dien, "Salvage Marines."

Brad's most recent work is the Shaun Piccinino-directed ESX Entertainment feature film, "A California Christmas," which filmed in Petaluma, CA, in July 2020, one of the first film productions after the initial pandemic shutdown to begin shooting under stringent COVID-19 safety protocols. The film debuts Monday December 14 as a Netflix Original Film.

Brad's body of work features a tremendous amount of experience with visual effects, and he is a full member of the [Visual Effects Society](#).

Brad is a:

- U.S. and Canadian dual citizen
- Full Member of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers
- Member of the Visual Effects Society
- Lifetime Member of the Digital Cinema Society
- Animal lover, advocate and vegetarian

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